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SOME RECENT ESSAYS.

BY LOUISE COLLIER WILLCOX.

It would seem to be toward the familiar essay that one should turn, in these days, for that proper study of mankind, the presentation of personality. When all is said and done, one comes back to the old-time saw, that the one perennially interesting theme under the sun is character—man as a personality, a force, an original, independent, creative power, modifying conditions, effecting environment, taking stock of the visible, tangible universe, transforming the facts already to hand, and out of himself creating new facts and more visible world.

There was a time when characterization was the chief pre-occupation of the novel. From Sterne and Fielding through the famous Victorian period, stretching far enough to cover the two great living masters of the novel, Hardy and Meredith, the presentation of character, its environment, limitations, growth, and ultimate reactions upon external facts and conditions made the novel; and only of recent date, and certainly of inferior import and quality, is the novel of plot, in which the complex situation and its solutions are the chief interest. It is fair to say that the novel or tale is second rate which we read rather for the story than for its character, where incidents stand out, and the force of personality which lies behind and projects all happenings is lost sight of. Stories are mere illustrations of character, and to read a story for the story's sake is to fall back into that unintelligent stage of existence which prefers pictures to text, which takes in only such rude and general information as may be conveyed by illustrations, and foregoes the subtle and nice distinctions, the full and copious understanding of words. In the end, the transitory existence of the slightly built, episodic modern novel does more than anything else to prove the truth of the saying of our great

living master, that fiction is valuable only in proportion as it offers us philosophy of life. Philosophy is most easily given by the study of human character. The development of soul, Browning said, was his chief concern, for little else was worth study. The novel being for the moment too slightly and superficially preoccupied with the infantine, final surprises, the essay, standing always after poetry as the chief concern of literature, holds the field as the medium for the portrayal of personality.

The essay, if it is to be taken into account at all, must deal in intellectual analysis, in nice distinctions and carefully weighed appreciations. Its splendid ancestry demands that a man should first, to some degree, discover himself, his real and abiding self, and against this background he should set up for consideration the authors, the subjects, the life, of which he writes. It is far from necessary that, like Montaigne, he should openly and constantly introduce himself, by name, anent each subject he lights upon. The essays of Pater are no less self-revelations than those of Montaigne, for every carefully drawn opinion is a publication of the state of soul, the level of mind from which the thought emerges. For this reason, those essays are of highest value which avoid current topics and changing, momentary, casual conditions. Wherever the heart, by reason of personal implication, governs the head, wherever the heat of debate is kept alive by the friction of immediate contact with a subject, the author runs the risk of presenting his casual and momentary feeling, rather than his ultimate judgments. Current matters and living authors may lead a writer astray with vastly more ease than the established far-removed fact which he views with impartial interest.

It would seem, too, that no man more than the essayist is committed to general studies and broad vistas. It is against the mass of his general knowledge that we must bring an author or a work to judgment. If we know only by comparison, the greater the amount of data against which a man sets a new object, the more apt is he to come at a sense of relative values. So the essayist is, by the nature of his work, partially redeemed from the blight of modern scholasticism, specialization. When the essayist specializes, it is at the cost of breadth. It is not the opinion of a scientific specialist upon a work of literature that tells; still less is it the opinion of the average man-in-the-street, but it is the opinion of a man of all-round parts, of general information and wide

study. Goethe was an ideal humanist and one of the wisest and most far-seeing of critics. Montaigne, the father of the essay *intime*, was a man of phenomenally wide reading. If we run over the list of successful English essayists, Sir Thomas Browne, Drummond of Hawthornden, whose "Cedar Grove" should undoubtedly admit him to the ranks, Addison, Steele, Johnson, Hazlitt, De Quincey, Arnold, Stevenson, Pater, we find we are dealing with men of wide knowledge and very general reading and appreciation.

To be sure, the main study of the essayist must be the art of combining words, conveying his thoughts with force, precision, elegance and individual charm; but, aside from this, he may have the widest-branching side issues into life, travel, the arts, sciences and metaphysics.

It is difficult to overrate the value of style, however, to the essayist. If the novelist can lean upon structure for his success; if the poet can trust to subject-matter to trim a halting measure; if, to the scholar, learning can replace charm, the essayist cannot away from the necessity for beauty, not only in diction, but in his sentence cadence. I came recently upon a monograph by a well-known American writer upon a subject of deepest interest to me, and yet found myself overwhelmed by dreariness and depression in the reading. That the result was not caused by the subject-matter was evident; and, after some difficulty in analyzing the trouble, I found that for twenty-seven running pages the author had not altered the order of his sentence structure and the periods were practically of uniform length.

We have had three essayists in the past generation, difficult to excel in this matter of fine style: Pater, whose warmth and richness of color it is difficult to find duplicated anywhere in English prose before or since, unless it be in that of Sir Thomas Browne, or Jeremy Taylor; Arnold, with his clarity, his elegance and precision of statement; and Stevenson, that intricate, quaint designer and artificer, taking us ever at unawares with his quips and cranks and turns of fancy, his delightful, vital grace of movement, and his talent for finding new settings to old words.

It is the white-light prose of Newman of which we are faintly reminded by A. C. Benson's style in "Seen from a College Window." "I find myself every year desiring and admiring this kind of lucidity and purity (Newman's) more and more. It seems to

me that the only function of a writer is to express obscure, difficult and subtle thoughts easily," he writes in "The Upton Letters." What a man desires, that to some degree he attains; as the old maxim runs: "We are as holy as we will to be holy." And so Mr. Benson, who aims in style and matter at the two highest reaches, simplicity and sincerity, has given us in the past year, two books* which tentatively, at least, we put in the shelf with our Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, St. Augustine, Montaigne and Stevenson to return to for counsels of fine living. The form of his two books is that of the personal confession. We get a picture of a gentle, leisurely scholar, surrounded by the best culture of his day, dwelling in one of the three most beautiful cities left in the world, looking out upon life from his vine-draped college windows upon the velvety college courts, and dedicating his chief thoughts to the enlargement of spirit which grows out of sympathy and truth. The subjects dealt with from the college window are the Point of View, Growing Older, Books, Sociabilities, Conversation, Beauty, Art, Authorship, Habits, Religion, etc.—in fact, life, regarded on its different sides and frankly discussed. In Sociabilities, the author writes movingly of solitude and in Authorship of sincerity, that difficult accomplishment of finding out who and what the self is which seems to be the motive-power of our bodies, and what is its relation to others apparently dwelling in like manner in the same world. "If the dullest person in the world would only put down sincerely what he or she thought about his or her life, about work and love, religion and emotion, it would be a fascinating document," he tells us. He himself is constantly trying to break down the barriers and tell us the truth about himself, to look into the minds of other men and to stretch sympathy to that unity of soul which is at the root of so much of the endeavor of this twentieth century. There is a certain amusing anecdote of a well-known American professor of philosophy, who, composing his most erudite book near a window overlooking the street, was constantly distracted by a stone-breaker at work outside. As long as the author worked, forcing words to convey his thought, the stone-breaker continued to let his pick rise and fall upon the larger stones. But the philosopher could not away with a burning desire to know how the stone-breaker was occupying his mind all day.

* "Seen from a College Window." A. C. Benson: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1906.

"The Upton Letters." A. C. Benson: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1906.

Finally, he went out and offered the conventional preliminaries of acquaintance about the weather, and then asked, "And what do you think of, while you work here all day long?" The stone-breaker stopped his activity, just long enough to raise his head and enunciate the words, "My work." Well, the professor was a true citizen of the twentieth century, for his consciousness included the widest range of abstract speculations and also the stone-breaker in the street and his occupation, while the stone-breaker was a mere survival of some dark age when the soul looked out no further than the stone it was breaking its outer shell upon. So Mr. Benson is of this new century, as large as himself and all his friends and his critics, as wide as all his knowledge and his sympathy. "I have myself," he says, "an intense curiosity about other people's point of view, what they do when they are alone, and what they think about." He frankly offers us his creed:

"I have grown to believe that the one thing worth aiming at is simplicity of heart and life; that one's relations with others should be direct and not diplomatic; that power leaves a bad taste in the mouth; that meanness, and hardness, and coldness are unforgivable sins; that conventionality is the mother of all dreariness; that pleasure exists, not in virtue of material conditions, but in a joyful heart; that the world is a very interesting and beautiful place; that congenial labor is the secret of happiness; and many other things which seem, as I write them down, to be dull and trite commonplaces, but are for me the bright jewels which I have found beside the way."

This is a clear and truthful offering of a personality, a point of view, and who loves the atmosphere will add this writer to his riches, will put the book near at hand to recur to it, as he would to an adjacent park, when his mind is weary or his spirit too frail to raise its own curtains of hope and courage and look out into a sunshiny infinite.

He tells us further:

"As I make my slow pilgrimage through the world a certain sense of beautiful mystery seems to gather and grow. I see that many people find the world dreary—and indeed there must be spaces of dreariness for us all; some find it interesting; some surprising; some find it entirely satisfactory. . . . I do not know why so much that is hard and painful and sad is interwoven with our life here; but I see, or seem to see, that it is meant to be so interwoven. All the best and most beautiful flowers of character and thought seem to me to spring up in the track of suffering; what is most sorrowful of all mysteries, the mystery of death, the ceasing to be, the relinquishing of our hopes and

dreams, the breaking of our dearest ties, becomes more solemn and awe-inspiring the nearer we advance to it. . . . The only happiness worth seeking is a happiness which takes all these dark things into account, looks them in the face, reads the secret of their dim eye and set lips, dwells with them, and learns to be quiet in their presence."

And with one last quotation and word of humble gratitude we must turn from this author, who is doing the fairest service that can be offered to man, teaching him to recognize and to multiply his best moments, to realize that the gratification of desire bears no relation to true happiness, and that there is nothing in the whole universe to be afraid of but selfishness:

"I believe there is in life a great and guarded city, of which we may be worthy to be citizens. We may, if we are blest, be always of the happy number, by some kindly gift of God; but we may also, through misadventure and pain, through errors and blunders, learn the way thither. And sometimes we discover the city afar off, with her radiant spires and towers, her walls of strength, her gates of pearl; and there may come a day, too, when we have found the way thither and entered in; happy if we go no more out, but happy, too, even if we may not rest there, because we know that, however far we wander, there is always a hearth for us and welcoming smiles. I speak in a parable, but those who are finding the way will understand me, however dimly; and those who have found the way, and seen a little of the glory of the place, will smile at the page and say: 'So he too is of the city.'

"The city is known by many names and wears different aspects to different hearts. But one thing is certain—that no one who has ever entered there is in any doubt again. He may wander far from the walls, he may visit it but rarely; but it stands there in peace and glory, the one true and real thing for him in mortal time and in whatever lies beyond."

This description of the mystic city, so easily recognized by those who have even had glimpses of it from afar, brings us to a very different book by a very different writer,* who closes his volume of essays on somewhat the same note:

"I cannot doubt that there are some in the world to-day who look back over the long past and watch the toiling of the human race towards peace, as the traveller in the Alps may, with a telescope, follow the mountain-climbers in their slow ascent through the snows of Mont Blanc; or, again, they watch our labors and painstaking in the valley of the senses, and wonder at our grotesque industry; or look upon the striving of men to build up a city for the soul amid the uncertainties of this life, as men look at the play of children who build

* "Shelburne Essays." Paul Elmer More: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1905.

castles and domes in the sands of the seashore and cry out when the waves have washed all their hopes away. I think there are some such men in the world to-day, who are absorbed in the fellowship of the wise men of the East and of the no less wise Plato, with whom they would retort upon the accusing advocates of the present, 'Do you think that a spirit full of lofty thoughts and privileged to contemplate all time and all existence can possibly attach any great importance to this life?' They live in the world of action, but are not of it. They pass each other at rare intervals on the thoroughfares of life and know each other by a secret sign, and smile to each other and go on their way comforted and in better hope."

So Mr. Paul Elmer More, too, is in the open secret; and, having quoted this final passage from the third series of his *Shelburne Essays*, I have given the most moving and most eloquent part of the volume. This is a book of literary criticism, and of his general literary doctrine it is difficult to do more than gather together the fragments which seem to make up the body or general attitude, and then to comment:

"I do not love thee, Dr. Fell,
The reason why I cannot tell,
But this I know and know full well. . . ."

Mr. More comes to us with the very highest recommendations of the press, and with the authority of a most distinguished position in American letters. We have been told that there is no one now writing who gives evidence of a better critical equipment than Mr. More; that he has width of view, an intimate acquaintance with the best that has been thought and said in the world (and a very wide knowledge that is too!), that he has formed for himself a sound literary canon and a sane philosophy of life, and that he is aware of his best predecessors and is apparently on the way to a set of philosophic principles which should lead him to a high and perhaps influential place in criticism. Having thus first absorbed such phrases as would have been adequate for a Hazlitt or an Arnold,—but who would praise the dead in such unmeasured terms!—it was distinctly a blow to cull the following opinions from the third series of essays:

"For my part, when it comes to a breach between the poetical and the prosaic, I take my place submissively with the latter. There is, at least, a humble safety in retaining one's pleasure in certain things of import with the vulgarest English mind; and, if it were obligatory to choose between them, I would surrender the wind-swept rhapsodies of Swinburne for the homely conversation of Whittier."

This is a winning point of view to the general, and there is no doubt that just such statements draw the unlettered to Mr. More, for the saying of that ancient Hebrew poet, that "where there is no vision the people perish," has ever been highly unpopular. It is true that all the English poets lapse from time to time, that Keats wrote that execrable stanza which begins:

"Oh, come, Georgiana, the rose is full blown,
The riches of Flora are lavishly strown,"

that Tennyson published,

"O little room, my heart's delight,"

and that Wordsworth rhymed,

"At this the boy hung down his head
And blushed, nor made reply,
And five times to the child I said,
'Why, Edward, tell me why?'"

But there is a gulf as deep and as wide as the Atlantic between the triteness of these and the vulgarity of Whittier's lines suggested by "Uncle Tom's Cabin,"

"Dry the tears for holy Eva,
With the blessed angels leave her."

Who admits such lines as these and does not recognize the standing of the poet who wrote:

"Unto each man his handiwork, unto each his crown,
The just fate gives,
Whoso takes the world's life on him and his own lays down
He, dying, so lives;

"Whoso bears the whole heaviness of the wronged world's weight,
And puts it by,
It is well with him suffering though he face man's fate:
How should he die?

"Seeing death has no part in him any more, no power
Upon his head,
He has bought his eternity with a little hour,
And is not dead—"

has himself taken his measure as a critic of poetry and annulled his influence with the reader more effectually than any one else could do it for him.

The same essay contains further matter, with which, if one

does not agree with it, one disagrees so vehemently as to feel discussion beyond the pale. For example when Mr. More says:

"Byron had written verse as vacillating and formless as any of Whittier's; Shelley had poured forth page after page of effusive vaporings; Keats learned the lesson of self-restraint almost too late; Wordsworth indulged in platitudes almost as simpering as 'holy Eva.'"

We are told that Christina Rossetti had "no guiding and restraining artistic impulse," that Mrs. Browning's sonnet:

"When our two souls stand up erect and strong,"

"would fit perfectly well into Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'House of Life,' and that it is distinguished from the sonnets of that wholly unrelated author by a certain falsetto in the tone"; that "Thackeray's women are more womanly than George Eliot's," that the secret of Browning's fame "is just this, that he dresses a worldly and easy philosophy in the forms of spiritual faith, and so deceives the troubled seekers after a higher life."

All these comments are noticeable because they vary so widely from all received canons of faith; and we cannot but feel that Mr. More has drawn attention to his criticism by means of a mental quality which resembles in the physical world the shrillness of the American voice. Again such a sentence as "The passion of Mrs. Browning, her attempt to *control* her inspiration to the demands of a shaping intellect," does not inspire confidence in the writer's fastidiousness. One does not control *to* something else, and a very obvious and slight inversion would have given the sentence precision; it would have been very easy for Mrs. Browning to shape her inspiration to the demands of a controlling intellect. There is one point, however, which we commend with enthusiasm in Mr. More's essays, and that is their length. They are long, and they give evidence of mental concentration, a definite self-reliance and independence of judgment in a day when criticism is ever apt to rely upon witticism, and brevity to verge upon levity. There is none of the light-handed and careless method of Mr. Chesterton, for example, whose whole literary stock in trade is to say vehemently that things are not as they seem, and to whom it is sufficient for anything to be accepted as a fact to write a whole essay to prove that the truth is only come at by turning things upside down. Probably, the finest criticism is the outgrowth of admiration, reverence and interest, those frames of mind which put self-interest to sleep, so that the critic, instead

of giving us himself and his opinions, gives us new reasons for deeper insight and fuller appreciation. It is, then, a misfortune that the third series of the Shelburne Essays should have lingered over the nineteenth century, the century preeminently of romantic idealism with which Mr. More has such imperfect sympathies.

If there is something rather thin and arid, something of the clear sweeps of the thought-emptied air of the West, about Mr. More's essays, it is pleasant to turn to the informal talks of A. T. Quiller-Couch,* for the wind that blows in at his Cornish window is heavy and redolent with memories and associations, and once more we are led along the paths of leisurely scholarship; we feel the very atmosphere fraught with the thoughts and pulses of the hearts now dust, adding to the mere personal dream of life the fulness of the past and the sense of the continuity of life and thought. "Suffer no chasm to interrupt this tradition, . . . Continuous life . . . that is what we want," he quotes his friend Thomas Edward Brown as saying to the schoolboys; and once again, of a long-lived church, "I postulate its continuity." It is just this continuity of literary interest that gives warmth and color to the Cornish Window Essays. They are informal talks labelled with the months of the year, and the writer ranges over all sorts of topics, poetry, philosophy of life and boating, where he is at his very best, and politics and athletics and antiquarianism where he is distinctly less interesting.

The criticism of our day has run to psychological analysis and detail. We go so far as to reconstruct the whole man, the relative keenness of his senses, his temperament, his habits, his physical abilities and defects from his works. The Rev. Mr. Beeching, however, has edited in Canon Ainger's "Lectures and Essays,"† a writer who belonged to an earlier and a larger tradition. Canon Ainger's volumes contain interesting and appreciative talk upon Shakespeare, Lamb, Swift, Cowper, Burns, Scott, Coleridge, Tennyson, and various lighter current topics. Mr. Beeching sums up the main point in the essays when he says in his introduction:

"With all his sensitiveness to beauty of form and expression, Ainger's interest in literature was in the main ethical. He was the product of a time when our English poets and imaginative writers were largely

* "Seen from a Cornish Window." A. T. Quiller-Couch: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1906.

† "Lectures and Essays." 2 vols. Alfred Ainger: The Macmillan Co., 1905.

concerned with ideas, and when critics were largely occupied in discussing the ideas of their authors.

"It was Ainger's idea that criticism was not to coruscate but to analyze: to get down to the truth about any matter, not to say brilliant things for the amusement of his audience."

In the matter of adding beauty by intimate knowledge of sources and origins, one can be especially grateful for the essay on Coleridge's "Ode to Dejection" and all the essays concerned with Shakespeare and his Art.

We have learned to expect a very well-defined attitude of mind and canon of taste from Mr. Arthur Symons;* he has stood for the survival of that blossom of æstheticism which had its golden hour in the early eighties, when Swinburne, Morris and Rossetti were living, when Ruskin was lecturing to working-men, when Burne-Jones was painting and Oscar Wilde posing, and the new æsthetic impulse was still in full force. About that time, too, Nichols, Mackail and Beeching published that exquisite little volume of young Oxford verse, "Love in Idleness," and Symons, somewhat belated, has clung to the old tradition and distilled many of its virtues and its vices, and absorbed them into his writing. So in the volume of "Studies in Prose and Verse," we find the subjects we should naturally have looked for, Merimée, Gautier, De Quincey, Hawthorne, Pater, Morris, de Maupassant, Oscar Wilde, d'Annunzio, Robert Bridges, Ernest Dowson, etc. There is always danger in trying to sum up a man's attitude towards life in a sentence or paragraph. Even the famous conclusion to Pater's "Renaissance," the wonderfully eloquent appeal to multiply our moments of keenest consciousness, would hardly convey his whole philosophy, but in part, at any rate, Mr. Symons's outlook may be given in the last sentence of his conclusion:

"A man who goes through a day without some fine emotion has wasted his day, whatever he has gained in it. . . . The making of one's life into an art is, after all, the first duty and privilege of every man. It is to escape from material reality into whatever form of ecstasy is our form of spiritual existence. There is the choice; and our happiness, our success in life, will depend on our choosing rightly, each for himself, among the forms in which that choice will come to us."

The essay on d'Annunzio is one of the most penetrating in the book, and avoids the faults of most of his critics, since it is

* "Studies in Prose and Verse." Arthur Symons: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1906.

neither a panegyric nor a wholesale denunciation. The Latin temperament, its preoccupation with mere personal emotion, its utter lack of social consciousness, its passive habit of living in the enjoyment of the perceptions, and, above all, the narrow circle of self in which it turns and turns, its hunger for material beauty and animal sensation, he analyzes with both sympathy and suspicion, ending on the questioning note of Mallarme: "*La chair est triste, hélas, et j'ai lu tous les livres.*"

Less sympathetic than one would have expected are the essays on Hawthorne, Stevenson and de Maupassant; with all their brilliancy the essays are too lacking in substance and body to last.

A volume that misses all the points to be scored by the literary essay is "Personal Forces in Modern Literature."* It is a volume in which the index page is, by all odds, the most interesting and best executed. The plan for studying the influences of such men as Cardinal Newman and James Martineau upon the moral thought of the age, of Huxley upon the scientific thought, of Wordsworth and Rossetti upon poetry, of Dickens upon the novel, of Hazlitt and De Quincey upon ranging and vagrant thought, is eminently satisfactory; but, alas! the author has stopped short at the scheme. He reaches no conclusions, and he sins hopelessly in the matter of diction, paragraphing and grammar. There are sentences without verbs, and pronouns hopelessly wandering without antecedents. The poetical essays are interesting by reason of the parallel readings industriously gathered together. This is a field vast enough for many students to till. "Personal Forces" would seem to be a book without a background of personality projecting it; it fails, not only because it is hastily and carelessly executed, but because the author had not an assured and definite enough point of view from which to write.

After all, what a man sees in the world and in books is what he is; and we look to the essay for the presentation of his personality. A man's actions and occupations are often foisted upon him by external circumstances; but when he writes an essay, he offers us his hours of natural preference and secret delight, and so we turn to the essay always for pleasure, for personal intercourse and for edification.

LOUISE COLLIER WILLCOX.

* "Personal Forces in Modern Literature." Arthur Rickett: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1906.